

MUHAMMAD AND WOMEN

At the time of Muhammad's birth, women in 7th century Arabia had few if any rights. Even the right of life could be in question, since it was not uncommon for small girls to be buried alive during times of scarcity. In the Qur'an, it is said that on Judgment Day "buried girls" will rise out of their graves and ask for what crime they were killed. Part of Muhammad's legacy was to end infanticide and establish explicit rights for women.

Islam teaches that men and women are equal before God. It grants women divinely sanctioned inheritance, property, social and marriage rights, including the right to reject the terms of a proposal and to initiate divorce. The American middle-class trend to include a prenuptial agreement in the marriage contract is completely acceptable in Islamic law. In Islam's early period, women were professionals and property owners, as many are today. Although in some countries today the right of women to initiate divorce is more difficult than intended, this is a function of patriarchal legislation and not an expression of Islamic values. Muhammad himself frequently counseled Muslim men to treat their wives and daughters well. "You have rights over your women," he is reported to have said, "and your women have rights over you."

Muhammad was orphaned at an early age. He once remarked that, "Heaven lies at the feet of mothers." As the father of four daughters in a society that prized sons, he told other fathers that, if their daughters spoke well of them on the Day of Judgment, they would enter paradise.

Beginning from the time of Muhammad's marriage to his first wife Khadijah, women played an important role in his religious career. According to Muslim sources, Khadijah was the first person Muhammad spoke to about his initial, terrifying experience of revelation. She consoled him and became the first convert to Islam. She remained a confidant and source of support throughout their entire marriage. Though men commonly took more than one wife in 7th Century Arabia, Muhammad remained in a monogamous marriage with Khadijah until her death, when Muhammad was in his fifties.

By then, Muhammad was working to establish a new community. In that context, over the next 10 years, he married several women. In some cases, these marriages occurred in order to cement political ties, according to the custom of the day. In some cases, the marriage provided physical and economic shelter to the widows of Muslims who had died or who had been killed in battle, and to the wife of a fallen foe. Of all his marriages, only one appears to have been controversial, and it was to the divorced wife of his adopted son.

Only one of his wives had not been previously married. Her name was Aisha, the daughter of one of his closest companions. Aisha was betrothed to Muhammad while still a girl, but she remained in her parents' home for several years until she reached puberty. Years later, when absent from Medina, Muhammad often recommended that, if religious questions arose, people should take them to his wife Aisha. After Muhammad's death, Aisha became a main source of information about Muhammad, and on medicine and poetry as well.

Aisha's assertion that Muhammad lived the Qur'an became the basis for Muslims ever since to emulate his example.

Muhammad's daughters also played an important and influential role, both in his life and in the establishment of Islam. Most notable was his daughter Fatima, who is still revered by all Muslims, particularly Shiite Muslims.

Following the Battle of Uhud (625), in which scores of male combatants died leaving unprotected widows and children, Muhammad and the Qur'an decreed that, in order to protect the orphans of such families, men might take up to four wives. The permission itself is surrounded with language that discourages the very thing it permits, saying that unless a man can treat several wives equally, he should never enter into multiple marriages. The usual supposition in the modern monogamous West—that Islam institutionally encourages lustful arrangements—is rejected by Muslims themselves as an ill-informed stereotype. At the same time, Muslim feminists point out that in various cultures at different economic strata the laws of polygamy have frequently operated to the clear detriment of women. Polygamy is an uncommon occurrence in the modern Muslim world.

Today, Islamic legal and social systems around the world approach and fall short of women's rights by varying degrees. Muslims themselves generally view Islam as progressive in these matters. Many Muslim feminists hold the view that the problems presently hindering Muslim women are those that hinder women of all backgrounds worldwide—oppressive cultural practices, poverty, illiteracy, political repression and patriarchy. There is a strong, healthy critique of gender oppression among Muslim feminist authors and activists worldwide.

It would be anachronistic to claim that Muhammad was a feminist in our modern sense. Yet the same present-day barriers to women's equality prevailed in 7th century Arabia, and he opposed them. Because in his own lifetime Muhammad improved women's position in society, many modern Muslims continue to value his example, which they cite when pressing for women's rights.

